

## **DROPOUT-RATE REDUCING STRATEGIES IN DENMARK AND IN HUNGARY**

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*The focus of my research is to reveal the efficiency of Hungarian and Danish dropout-rate reducing strategies, good practices in order to help the population concerned reintegrate into the education system and/or the world of work and above all into society. In addition, my aim is to make a clear comparison between the dropout rate reducing strategies applied in Hungary and in Denmark. I intend to concentrate on student retention and achievement which, I assume, are strongly related to the following three factors: the efficient mentoring system, peer assistance and encouraging learning environment.*

**Keywords:** dropout-rate, early school leavers, early school leaving, disadvantaged groups, innovative methods, encouraging learning environment, flexible education system

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### **Dropout-rate reducing strategies in Denmark and in Hungary**

I focus on student retention and achievement which, I assume, are strongly related to the following three factors: the efficient mentoring system, peer assistance and encouraging learning environment (where students can meet outside the boundaries of the ordinary pedagogical environment and modern educational methods).

Undoubtedly all three factors are of major importance. However, the study of John Smyth has revealed the high efficiency of peer assistance and support (Smyth, 2004).

He pointed out that friendship and intimacy were considered significant reasons for staying at school, and hence constituted a significant site for doing identity work. That is, becoming somebody was being negotiated through relationships with peers. In many cases, friendship was the reason for going to school (Smyth, 2004). Friendship, therefore, needs to be considered as trivial or incidental “noise” (McLeod, 1998).

### **Who are the Early School Leavers?**

Early school leavers constitute a homogeneous group, and the effects of early school leaving are greater in some countries than in others. Their reasons for leaving school prematurely are highly individual and also differ

from one country or region to another. Nevertheless, there are certain patterns that indicate who the early school leavers are.

Early school leavers are in general more likely to:

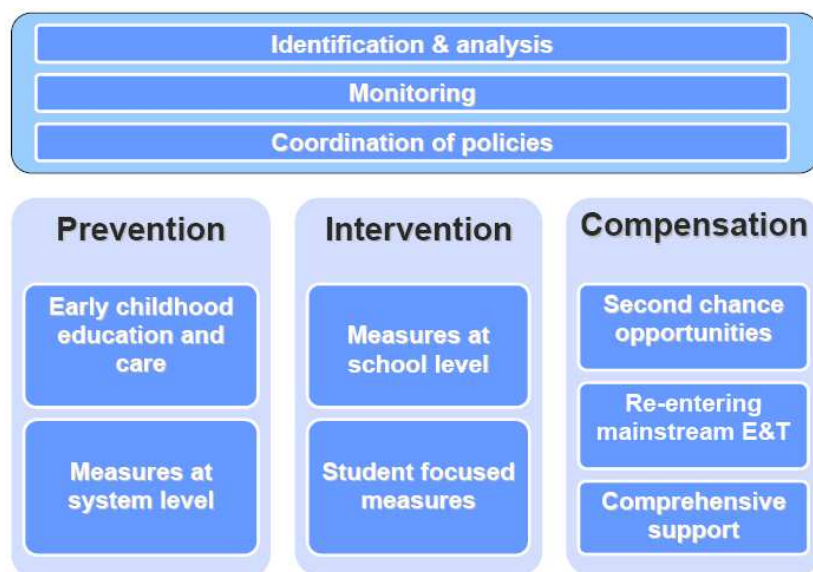
- Come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable groups,
- Have had a history of disengagement from school, for instance of absence, truancy and expulsion, and achieved poorly in school,
- Come from minority or migrant backgrounds,
- Have experienced frequent mobility– both residential mobility and school mobility,
- Be concentrated in particular areas with low educational achievement (ghettoisation),
- Be male rather than female (Commission Staff Working Paper, 2011).

Early school leaving is socially constructed/ it depends upon certain conditions, and is a product of the institutions, systems and culture(s) we create and sustain. Given that schooling still seems to fail those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and that staying onto complete schooling is still very much skewed in a favour of children from wealthy families, invoking such a caveat also laminates over any socio-economic or cultural dimensions to the problem (Smyth, 2004).

### The basic aspects of comprehensive strategies in early school leaving

Early school leaving and its causes are not purely educational but the quality of school education has a strong impact on its incidence. Improving the quality of education in individual schools and at system level helps reduce the risk of dropping-out. The following chart summarises the basic aspects of comprehensive strategies in early school leaving.

Figure 1.



(Commission Staff Working Paper, 2011:13)

## E2C the link between Hungary and Denmark

In 1999 the Association of European Cities and Second Chance Schools (E2C) was founded in the Netherlands, Herlen. The E2C's mission is to offer marginalized youngsters with lack of basic vocational and social competencies a well planned and professional (educational) second chance, mostly after they dropped out of mainstream education. Today E2C consists of 11 cities, 22 labelled Second Chance Schools and 13 non-labelled associates from the following countries France, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Macedonia, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. The E2C- network seeks to ensure that experiences are shared between schools and across borders.

The teaching methodology in E2C schools must be different from mainstream schools characterized by intensified focus on the need of the given individual, by flexible teaching modules and by committed partnerships. The teacher plays a key role in the E2C schools, who is an empathetic and compassionate educator and must be committed to work with second chance youngsters. Innovative methods as well as individual learning pathways are paramount in a motivating learning environment. Constructive and appreciative relationships between educator and pupil in the Second Chance Schools are key factors to success. The main goals of the E2C-network as follows:

- ✓ Organising exchange and transfer of experience.
- ✓ Developing second chance methodologies and tools.
- ✓ Assisting cities and organizations , which wish to set up a second chance school.

There are many possibilities within the network for exchange programmes such as teachers conference, youth summit and other projects (Schmitsek, 2010a).

In 2008 the Springboard (*Dobbantó*) Programme joined the E2C first from Hungary and then the Hungarian Second Chance School called Belvárosi Tanoda and last but not least 2 *Dobbantó* schools (Martin János Vocational Training School and Than Károly Vocational Training School) became the member of the network.

As the project manager of "*Dobbantó*" I had the chance to have an overview of the E2C network and not to mention a close cooperation with many different partner organizations including the Copenhagen Youth School.

"*Dobbantó*" is based on national and international good practices mainly from the E2C expertise. The European-wide network provided the programme with many different second chance school methods, tools and with teacher exchange programmes.

I intend to focus on the Danish and the Hungarian dropout-rate reducing strategies in my paper because as the project manager of "*Dobbantó*" I had a deeper insight into the second chance opportunities in Hungary and had a slight chance to learn new approaches from Danish experts.

In addition, I would like to mention the fact that I was awarded with a 5-month scholarship from the Danish Government in January 2011, which allowed me to observe how second chance opportunities work in practice in Denmark.

## Preventive strategies in Denmark

Pre-school programmes reduce the risk of early school leaving. Denmark has a tradition for early childhood education and care and already meets the 95% benchmark of early childhood education and care.

Denmark has finally realized that a rigid education system and too strong emphasis on academic skills is an obstacle when combating early school leaving. Thus, the rigid Danish school system is changing, and now *the individual needs of the students are taken more seriously*. Intensive courses along with flexible vocational pathways are measures that are initiated to prevent early school leaving for instance *production schools* (Commission Staff Working Paper, 2011).

Another way of prevention is *registry of attendance for every lesson*, which is compulsory. The data are reported to the local governing body, thus identifying the students that are prone to leave school prematurely. These students may benefit from intensified guidance and counselling that bring them back on track.

A brand new strategy to reduce ESL is to assess all students before transiting from lower to upper secondary education. If necessary, the student involved will be offered alternatives that help the student acquire skills to reach his or her educational goal.

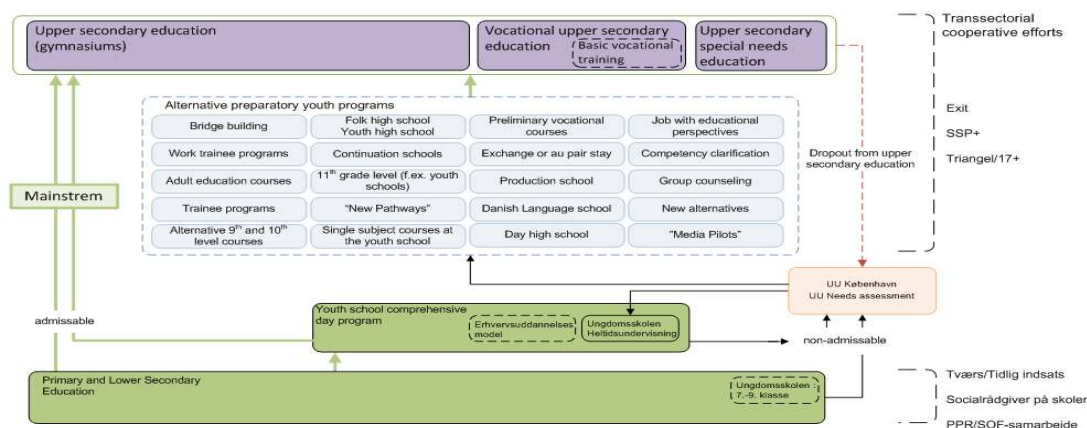
## Intervention – Compensation

*Youth School* supports and involves young people less than 20 years of age in educational activities and assists young people at risk and early school leavers in transition from basic school to further education or job opportunities. The full-time programmes offer the young people the opportunity to acquire skills that are needed to complete a lower secondary education (Commission Staff Working Paper, 2011).

The Copenhagen Youth School is comprised of different units of second chance education which targets different youth groups: Departments North and West offer leisure time education for students aged 13-18; Department South and East offer full-time education and leisure time education for students aged 13-25; Department City offers full-time education for immigrant youngsters.

The purpose of the youth school is to give young people the possibility of improving their knowledge, give them the understanding of and the preparation for access to larger society and to contribute to an improved quality of life. At the same time, the aim is to develop young people's interest in participating actively in a democratic society (Act on Youth Schools, 2004).

Figure 2. Youth Education in Denmark



(Source: <http://www.eng.uvm.dk/Education>)

## The Outreach Team

In the year 2005 the Youth Educational Counselling Centre (UU Copenhagen) and Copenhagen Youth School were politically instructed to establish an Outreach Team.

The team aims to guide early school leavers requiring *special guidance* and above all they have to ensure that more young persons pass a youth education (goal: 95 % in 2015), achieve an honourable life and become democratic citizens.

The target group clearly shows that it is not only a matter of education politics but also has social implications. That is why The Children and Youth Administration (CYA/including UU Copenhagen), the Social Service (SSE) and the Employment and Integration Administration (EIA) have a common responsibility (Sams, 2011).

## Good practices in Hungary for prevention

1. *Desegregation policies.* Hungary has a large Roma minority with worrying education indicators: 15% of the Roma pupils do not attend school beyond primary level and only 2% attend higher education. Early school leaving and repetition rates are very high. Many Roma pupils attend segregated schools or segregated streams within schools and therefore education results remain low.

In order to change the situation in 2006, the government, in co-operation with the Hungarian Institute of Educational Research and Development and the Roma Education Fund, promoted the development of "integrated education" through grants and technical assistance. Schools benefitting from this programme must ensure that their school population reflects the socio-economic balance and composition of their district. They take a fixed quota of multiply-disadvantaged students and foster school quality by e.g. extracurricular activities (Commission Staff Working Paper, 2011).

2. *Programmes in primary education:* a) "MAG-Program" (Bognár, 2005); b) "Lépésről lépésre" – Step by step (Glauber, 1997)

## Compensation – Intervention: The "Dobbantó" Programme

According to the latest survey the rate of drop-out in Hungarian vocational schools is as high as 30%. It is of major importance to reduce this extremely high drop-out rate and help the group concerned to (re)integrate into society. That was the reason why "Dobbantó" (Springboard) Programme was launched by the Public Foundation for Equal Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities. The programme is based on national (in Hungary registered as SZFP I-II.) and international good practices (Copenhagen Youth School, APS-International and E2C - from Europe; and TBRG from Canada). The goal of the programme - covering the period from 2008 to 2011 - is to provide a springboard for early school-leavers and students with special needs (Schmitsek, 2010b).

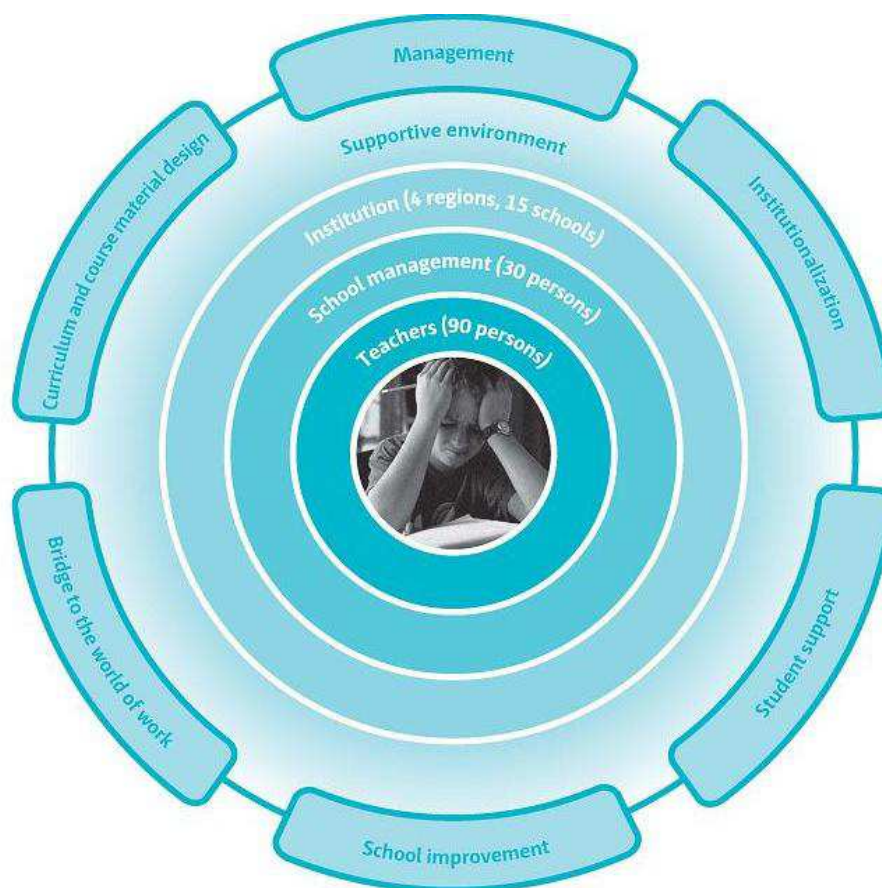
"Dobbantó" provides an extra year in school to give a second chance to these adolescents to continue their career according to their individual needs. This signifies:

- ❖ to return to first chance education,
- ❖ to start vocational training in a mainstream training school,
- ❖ to start a vocational training programme in adult education,
- ❖ to gain employment.

The programme offers professionals (edu-coaches, changing facilitator mentors, five working groups such as institutionalization, student support, bridge to the world of work, curriculum and course material design, school improvement and the management), trainings with innovative methods and new educational content to help the teachers and school leaders of the vocational schools concerned.

As a result, teachers can facilitate differentiated activities adapted to students' needs and offer career guidance based on personalised career plans made in cooperation with the students. Professionals also help young adults with a series of failures behind them to finish their studies and acquire competencies required by the labour market. The programme helps school leaders in establishing and developing successful cooperation with relevant local partners.

Edu-coaches provide leaders with support to be able to assess the current situation and implement a school improvement plan. The programme encourages the participating vocational schools to develop a regional network (Schmitsek, 2010b).

*The supportive system of the programme*

"Dobbantó" uses different resources of support. In the student- teacher relation students receive: personal development plan, student contract, individual learning pathways, life-career model.

In the teacher- changing facilitator mentor relation teachers receive: use of adaptive and differentiated teaching methods, learning support/resources, self improvement and reflection, mentoring, career guidance.

In the school management- edu-coach relation the school management receives: school improvement plan and its evaluation, improving personal management skills, relations to the world of work.

On the institutional level the programme provides the given schools with analysis of present state, differentiated school improvement, competence-based programme package, resources for implementation. The programme helps the changing facilitator mentors and the edu-coaches with regular trainings, meetings and case discussions.

"Dobbantó" provides multi-component solutions for early school leavers to integrate into society. It has to be mentioned though that the actual composition of the population, culture and education of a given Dobbantó (Springboard) school determines the way and extent of reducing the drop-out rate (Schmitsek, 2010b).

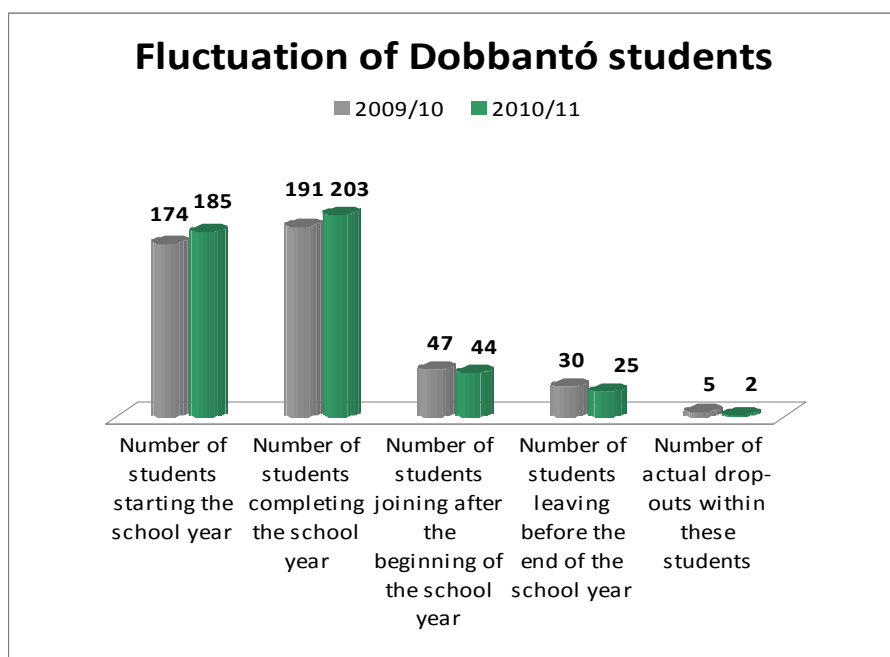
### The success of the Dobbantó programme in numbers

The first Dobbantó schoolyear (2009/2010) ended in June 2010 showing surprisingly good results as regards both completion and continuation of studies. A total of 191 students arrived in the 15 schools where the programme is operating. Nearly 90% continued studies in one form of education or another. The most important result is that through individual development, more than 65% of students were able to start studies in some form of vocational school. Considering the nature of the target group, the rate of students getting into secondary school providing graduation is significant (nearly 8%). Meanwhile, persons dropped out of the programme for any reason does not reach 10%, only 2.6% of this can be considered as classic drop out.

In the second Dobbantó year the results are also well-promising as 185 students started the academic year and 203 youngsters completed their studies. The number of dropouts is incredibly low only 2 students.

So the Dobbantó programme really does prove that young people who have drifted to the edge can be effectively led back to the school system with the right pedagogical system (Schmitsek, 2010b).

Figure 3. Gathered data from the secondary schools participated in the Dobbantó Programme



### The rate of students continuing studies after completion of "Dobbantó" is high

In the first Dobbantó year the majority (31.4%) of those who finished got to the 9th grade of vocational schools, a further 10% to 10th grade. The number of students who got into pre-time vocational training (over 15%) and vocational training based on the 8th grade is also significant (11%).

In the second year 29% of the Dobbantó 'graduates' went to the 9th grade and 15% got to the 10th grade of different vocational schools. 19% of them went to accelerated vocational programme and 13% continued their studies in vocational training programme continuing 8th grade of primary school.



The minority went to vocational training programme continuing 10th grade. 5% of the students got to general secondary school, another 5% continued their studies in adult training. The 3% of the young 'graduates' remained in the Dobbantó class for another year.

This data indicates that the Dobbantó programme is able to develop and guide a significant percentage of students, who would otherwise drift to the edge, to get into some type of vocational training after a Dobbantó year. This confirms the hypothesis that with intensive individual development, a significant rate of students with good qualities are able to get into education which provides complete secondary qualifications (Schmitsek, 2010b).

*Relatively few enter a job immediately.* 21 students of the 191 who completed the first year of the Dobbantó school are not continuing their studies. 13 of these started work until the beginning of September and only 4.2% (8 ex- students) was unemployed. In the second year 3,9% of the students entered the world of work, and the same amount of youngsters (3,9%) became unemployed.

Figure 4. Gathered data from the schools participated in the Dobbantó Programme

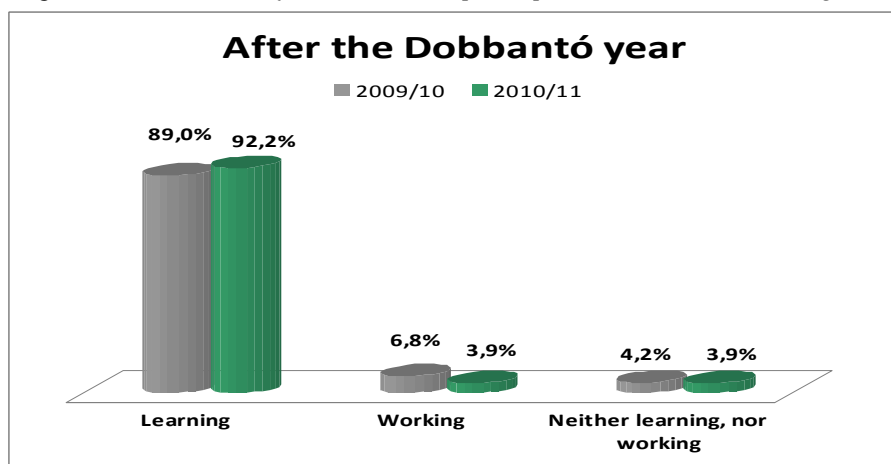
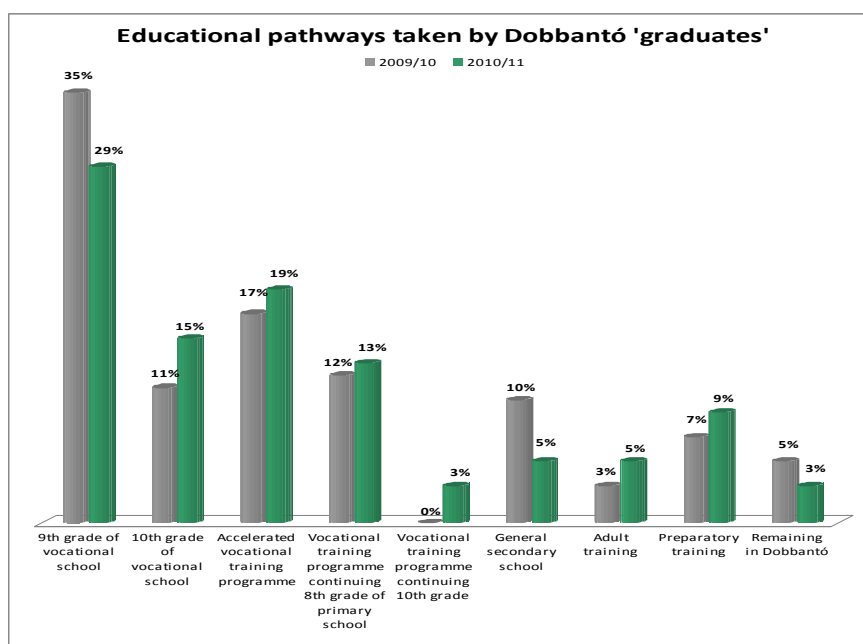


Figure 5. Gathered data from the schools participated from the Dobbantó Programme



## Compensation

*Second chance programmes: Belvárosi Tanoda Alapítvány Foundation.* Hungary's Belvárosi Tanoda Secondary School is part of the network of "Tanoda" centres, which aims to provide a second chance for early school leavers with the extra support in education. It focuses on teaching adapted to the students' personalities and abilities and helps students to finish upper-secondary and pass their final exams. The school offers no full-year classes, but organises small study groups per subject, one-to-one teaching is used when necessary and possible.

Every student has a supportive pair-teacher for help both in learning and in other aspects of life. The student signs a contract with personal objectives for the school year and learns according to a personal timetable. The school facilities create a family atmosphere and ensure a safe and accepting environment for young adults.

Rooms are used in a flexible manner, including leisure, cultural and sports activities as well as personal and team discussions. One of the main objectives is to create a rich social climate with various opportunities to learn social roles and develop self-esteem (Commission Staff Working Paper, 2011).

## Perspectives

The EU benchmarks are not to be considered as concrete targets for individual countries. It is an 'invitation' for Member States to consider, how and to what extent they can contribute through national actions. But what we really need is a uniform education strategy that not only reduces early school leaving, but also prevents early school leaving in the Member States.

An important step in combating ESL is to realize that rigid education systems need updating, in order to take the individual needs of the students into account. We cannot afford to waste potential that can improve productivity and performance, and we cannot accept that a group of EU citizens feel alienated and excluded in today's society.

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